Old Lover

Of all the critics of current U.S. strategy in Vietnam, perhaps none has spoken with greater authority than Edward G. Lansdale, the retired Air Force major general who was the model for the legendary "Colonel Hillandale" in "The Ugly American." "You don't win guerrilla wars," says Lansdale, "by bombing and napalming people and then having all their relatives and tribesmen turn against you." Last week, Lansdale was given the opportunity to prove that there is another way to win. With President Johnson's enthusiastic concurrence, he was appointed special assistant to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge.

As an important member of the U.S. establishment in Saigon, Lansdale is expected to push hard for a greater effort on the political and economic fronts of the war, while opposing the recent trend toward hit-or-miss bombing and the burning of villages. In this he will be supported by Lodge, who is known to share Lansdale's theory that the only effective way to cope with Communist "wars of national liberation" is to present the people with an alternative—and equally revolutionary—cause.

Pinnacle of Power: Lansdale first put this theory into practice in the late 1940s when, as an adviser to the Philippines' late Ramon Magsaysay, he helped defeat the Communist Huk guerrillas by convincing Manila of the necessity for democratic reforms. Later, in South Vietnam, working under cover, Lansdale was credited with almost singlehandedly maneuvering the late President Ngo Dinh Diem to the pinnacle of power. When it became apparent that Diem was losing touch with his own people, Lansdale tried to persuade Diem to adopt popular reform measures. But, partly under pressure from Diem himself, U.S. authorities reassigned Lansdale to the Pentagon, ending his Saigon career.

A guerrilla pleads for his life

That was nine years ago but Lansdale is still remembered among Americans and Vietnamese in Saigon by a string of colorful nicknames—including "The Renegade." And, indeed, the lean, 57-year-old Lansdale has always preferred to work directly with the people who seem to have their fingers on the levers of power without concerning himself about formal chains of command. As a result, his return to South Vietnam is hardly calculated to please the Pentagon's organization men.

Hit It Off: No less suspicious of Lansdale's reputation are South Vietnam's military rulers, who fear that when Lansdale arrives in the next few weeks he may immediately set out to restore

Newsweek

Returning: General Lansdale

civilian government. That, however, seems highly doubtful. For some of South Vietnam's young generals fully share Lansdale's revolutionary spirit and should hit it off with him well.

If he runs true to form, Lansdale can be counted on to experiment with unconventional tactics. But this time his mission under Lodge is unlikely to call for him to engage in his old specialty of cloak-and-dagger operations. Rather, he may well find himself in charge of "social engineering" in the South Vietnamese industrial complex that the U.S. hopes to build around its base at Cam Ranh Bay.

Lansdale himself says he has no preconceived ideas about his new job. "I've got to get out there and see for myself," he says. "The situation has changed. All I know is that I've got an old love affair with the people of Asia and I'm going back to see if I can help."

Another Eden

When he returns to South Vietnam, counterinsurgency specialist Edward Lansdale will find it cruelly transformed. Despite massive U.S. aid, the once-bountiful Vietnamese countryside is suffering slow economic strangulation at the hands of the Viet Cong. One exception to this rule, however, is An Giang Province, located in the Mekong River rice bowl 90 miles southwest of Saigon. A peaceful patchwork of chartreuse paddies and murky waterways, An Giang Province is the bastion of the Hoa Hao religious sect—and a living proof of the validity of Lansdale's theory of "the alternate cause."

Less than a year ago, An Giang's Hoa Hao peasants found themselves the victims of a calculated campaign of terror. One after another, their village chiefs were being kidnaped and murdered by Viet Cong agents. But rather than knuckle under, the politically astute Hoa Haos fought back—and won.

Steeling the Hoa Haos in their fight was a history of persecution dating back to the sect's founding in 1939 by "Mad Monk" Huynh Phu So, an ascetic reformer who preached a simplified form of Buddhism that struck echoes from Christ's Sermon on the Mount. "It is better," Phu So said, "to pray with a pure heart before the family altar than to perform gaudy ceremonies in a pagoda . . ."

Outlaws: Phu So's teachings alienated politicians of almost every stripe. The Communists grew so jealous of his influence with the peasants that they had him assassinated in 1947, and during the regime of the late President Ngo Dinh Diem, Hoa Hao leaders were treated as outlaws. But recently, South Vietnam's new Premier, Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, shrewdly decided to give legal status to the Hoa Hao sect.

In doing so, Premier Ky hoped to win for the Saigon government the loyalty of the tightly disciplined Hoa Hao leadership which, through its powerful National Council and numerous village committees, effectively controls the destiny of an estimated 2 million devotees and the administration of eleven South Vietnamese provinces. For their part, the independent-minded Hoa Haos want nothing more from Saigon than to be left alone to conduct their own affairs.

And this they do with remarkable success. In An Giang, where 80 per cent of the province's 430,000 peasants belong to the sect, the locally recruited Popular Forces militia and Home Guard, composed entirely of Hoa Haos, provide protection against the Viet Cong without any assistance from regular government troops. Travel in most parts of the province is so safe that Americans ride around armed with little more than their

Continued